

A further campaign of mediaevalising decoration was carried out in the late 1860s by Herbert Williams, who had worked with Scott on the earlier scheme. Williams built a three-bay cloister-like passage, with plaster vaults, on the south side of the building; and in the body of the church he added richly painted decoration to Wren's columns and capitals. The reredos was enriched with inlaid marble, and the chancel was given new white marble steps and a mosaic floor of Minton's tesserae and tiles. A circular opening was cut in the vault of each aisle bay and filled with stained glass, and skylights installed above.

In 1906, the parishes of St Peter le Poer and St Benet Fink were united to St Michael's upon the demolition of the former church, the latter having been united to the former after its demolition in 1846. The church was fortunate to escape serious damage in the Second World War. The interior was restored in 1960, with the Victorian polychrome paintwork being replaced with a more restrained colour scheme of blue, gold and white. The organ was built in 1684 and has been enlarged and enriched over the years.



St Michael's Cornhill

Cornhill London EC3V 9DS
www.st-michaels.org.uk



Welcome to the Parish Church of St Michael's Cornhill

Do take time to look at our beautiful stained glass; the majestic columns; our historic organ; the carving of the Pelican in Her Piety; the marble and mosaics; the intricate wood carvings of flowers, birds, animals and religious subjects on the pews; and the sculpture of St Michael in the porch.



Suggested donation for this leaflet: 50p

You are welcome to take photographs

A Brief History

The Church of St Michael's Cornhill lies over the remains of the basilica of the great Roman Forum built in the first century AD. It stands near to the site of a church founded by King Lucius in AD 179 – the oldest site of Christian worship in London. The name “Cornhill” was first mentioned in the 12th century, the “hill” indicating the rising ground on which St Michael's stands and “corn” being derived from the corn-market that was once held there.

The church is known to have been in existence before the Norman Conquest, for it is recorded that in 1055 Alnothus the priest gave it to the abbot of Evesham. During the reign of King Henry VII (1485-1509), the patronage was transferred to the Drapers' Company, which still has the gift of the living. Robert Fabyan, the author of the “Chronicles of England and France”, was buried at St Michael's in 1513. King Henry VIII's physician, Robert Yaxley, was buried at the church in 1540.

The mediaeval church, with the exception of the tower, was completely destroyed in the Great Fire of 1666. The present church was rebuilt by Sir Christopher Wren between 1669 and 1672. The new church was 83 feet long and 67 feet wide, divided into nave and aisles by majestic Tuscan columns, with a groined ceiling. The walls, George Godwin noted, did not form right-angles, indicating the re-use of the medieval foundations.

The fifteenth century tower, having proved unstable, was demolished in the early eighteenth century. A 130-foot high replacement was completed in 1721. In contrast to the main body of the church, it was built in a Gothic style, in imitation of that of Magdalene College, Cambridge. Construction had begun in 1715, with money from the coal fund. The designer of the lower stages was probably William Dickinson, working in Christopher Wren's office. Funds proved inadequate, and work stopped in 1717. The tower was eventually completed with the aid of a grant from the Commission for Building Fifty New Churches, the upper stages being to the design of its surveyor, Nicholas Hawksmoor. It houses a peal of 12 bells, originally cast by the Phelps Foundry of Whitechapel, but a new ring of 12 bells, cast by Taylors of Loughborough, was installed in April 2011.

The interior was beautified and repaired in 1701 and again in 1790. The vestry retains its 17th century panelling, with a fine carved overmantel. In 1716, the poet Thomas Gray, famous for his “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard”, was born in a milliner's shop adjacent to St Michael's and was baptised in the church; the font in which this occurred, dating from 1672, still remains.

The Pelican in Her Piety is a symbol of self-sacrifice and a mediaeval allegorical depiction of the sacrifice and Passion of Jesus Christ. A pelican's breast plumage has a reddish tinge and its beak a red tip, and in ancient times it was thought that the pelican mother was willingly wounding herself in the chest and proffering her own blood to feed her young.

The interior of the church was extensively remodelled in the High Victorian style by Sir George Gilbert Scott between 1857 and 1860. Scott recalled that he “attempted by the use of early basilican style to give a tone to the existing classic architecture”. As part of this scheme of reordering, the eminent woodcarver William Gibbs Rogers carved new pews, a pulpit and a lectern.

Scott added an elaborate Gothic porch (1858-1860) facing Cornhill. It is decorated with carving by John Birnie Philip that includes a high-relief tympanum sculpture depicting St Michael disputing with Satan.

An ensemble of stained glass was made by the firm Clayton & Bell, with a representation of Christ in Glory in the large circular east window. Its splays were enriched with inlaid and carved marble, with four heads in high relief enclosed in medallions. The other windows contained a series of stained glass images illustrating the life of Christ, with the crucifixion at the west end. Scott inserted Gothic tracery to the circular clerestory windows and into the plain round-headed windows on the south side of the church. New side windows were created in the chancel.

An elaborate stone reredos, incorporating paintings of Moses and Aaron, was constructed in an Italian Gothic style. The chancel walls were lined with panels of coloured marble up to the level of the top of the reredos columns and richly painted above that point.